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15 January 1975

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Brezhnev's Position

1. A number of developments -- Brezhnev's admission to a hospital, cancellation of his Cairo visit, certain setbacks to his policies, and Moscow rumors of political infighting -- make it useful to examine the General Secretary's position.

The Public Record

2. In official terms, Brezhnev had an active early winter. On his way back from meeting President Ford in Vladivostok, Brezhnev visited Mongolia on November 25-27. On December 4 he left for Paris for a stay that lasted to December 7. He spoke on domestic and foreign policy to a meeting of the party Central Committee on December 16. He then attended a three-day session (December 18-20) of the Supreme Soviet, and a similar session of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet on December 24, his last public appearance before entering a hospital on the 26th.

The Private Record

3. In actuality, Brezhnev's pattern of activity was not quite what the public record indicated. Between the Vladivostok summit and Christmas, a good deal of the time when he was not on public view was spent at the polyclinic or his dacha. It is not clear what the trouble was:

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on the 26th. Given his history, however, he could have suffered mild heart failure, although evidence on this score is lacking. (There is no evidence of a new, more sinister disease, such as leukemia.)

4. Brezhnev may have been suffering from the flu as well, but at any rate it seems that his hospitalization was not an emergency matter. On 1 January he was able to leave the hospital for a short while; he attended his mother's lying-in on 6 January, and is reportedly now back at work. The suspicion is strong that Brezhnev found it convenient to enter the hospital in order, among other things, to be able to back out of his commitment to a Cairo visit which, as it approached, appeared increasingly unpromising.

The Recent Political Scorecard

5. In assessing Brezhnev's status, it is important to consider how his policies are faring. In recent months Brezhnev has experienced both pluses and minuses. His meeting with President Ford falls into the former category, and his Paris visit probably does so as well. Soviet economic plans, US trade restrictions, and relations with Egypt are in the latter group.

6. The Vladivostok summit allayed concerns about the Ford administration and produced a highly visible symbol of mutual commitment to continued detente. In private, Soviet officials have been highly positive both about the Brezhnev-Ford meeting and the arms agreement reached at Vladivostok. The arms understandings have also enjoyed extensive and uniformly favorable coverage in the Soviet press, even while criticism of the US on other issues increased.

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7. It is possible that there is some dismay among the military over the details of the Vladivostok accord, particularly Brezhnev's acceptance of a 1977 ceiling on central systems which will require a small Soviet reduction and the dropping of FBS demands. But there is no evidence that the General Secretary has been under actual pressure on the resulting agreements.

8. While these successes accrued, problems apparently arose in December concerning other elements of Brezhnev's policies, including the higher priority given industries producing consumer goods and economic relations with the US.

9. Next year's economic plan specifies that group A industries (largely producer goods) will grow at a higher rate than group B industries (largely consumer goods). This reverses the rates of growth laid down in 1971-75 plan. Those rates were linked, at least in propaganda, with Brezhnev's promise to improve living standards, which was called the "main task" of this and future five-year plans. Planning chief Baybakov admitted that the original 1975 consumer targets have "proved unreachable," and a Pravda editorial reported that the plenum noted the need first of all "for a further successful development of heavy industry which is the basis of our economy."

10. On December 18, two days after the Central Committee met, Moscow published Gromyko's letter of October 26 to Secretary Kissinger and a TASS statement, both denying that the Soviet Union had agreed to foreign demands on emigration in connection with the US foreign trade bill. Soviet media changed focus from euphoric treatment of the Vladivostok summit to criticism of US trade restrictions and attempts to interfere in internal affairs, with hints about negative consequences for relations with the US.

11. Although public treatment of the plenum has been routine, there are some indications that all may not have gone smoothly. The unusual one-day gap between the party meeting and the Supreme Soviet session suggests that a

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two-day plenum may have been planned and for unknown reasons was cut short.

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The US Embassy has heard reports that dissatisfaction was voiced at the plenum over the US trade bill and the compromise on emigration, with local officials complaining about problems posed for maintaining local controls.

12. Clearly the current status of this issue, and particularly the Congressional limits on credits, is a setback to Soviet detente hopes and to Brezhnev. We do not know whether Moscow's public reaction was due to complaints at the plenum, or a desire to avoid tacit acceptance of Congressional conditions, or both. But the issue must be a significant debit in Brezhnev's current balance sheet.

13. The collapse of Brezhnev's projected triumphant Middle East tour has probably not done his internal standing any good. His hard-nosed policy with respect to Egypt is not one that domestic critics would easily fault. It seems unlikely that any Soviet would argue that he should quit making demands on Sadat and proceed to give the Egyptians everything they want in hardware and economic assistance. Brezhnev -- or Gromyko -- can be faulted for bad tactics; that is, publicly announcing a trip to Egypt before the success of that trip was assured, but he cannot be accused of bowing to Sadat's demands. On the other hand, it is possible that he was prepared to go some distance in this direction, and cancelled the trip only after his colleagues raised policy objections.

Future Implications

14. The mixed nature of the evidence and the many unknowns do not point to a simple prognosis. In the near term, the best guess is that Brezhnev will overcome his

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recent difficulties and resume the vigorous leadership he has exercised in recent years. The immediate cause of his hospitalization is apparently not of a critical nature, and he has shown an ability to adapt to his other more basic ailments and reduced stamina. Favorable developments and his skill at politics may soon restore Brezhnev's image of political vigor. In this case, the list of recent policy checks will look no more impressive than similar lists drawn up by analysts many times in the past.

15. As the months go by, however, Brezhnev's health problems may take a greater toll. If this happens, the need for treatment and rest will begin to erode the authority that comes from active and visible leadership. Should this process coincide with a period in which policy disappointments predominate over successes, the weakening of his political position would be the greater.

16. In such circumstances, Brezhnev might rather willingly retire. This would not be out of character, and it would be in keeping with his desire to preserve his reputation and policies, which would be jeopardized if he elected to hang on as long as possible. Doubtless he hopes to remain in charge until the next Party Congress, due in 1976, and to use that occasion to secure his position in Soviet history. Retirement is in fact beginning to be mentioned to Westerners by Soviet sources, including the well-connected journalist Yury Zhukov, but this is happening so far in advance of the Congress as to raise a question whether Brezhnev's interest is being served.

17. Retirement would initially leave power in the hands of the senior leaders on whom Brezhnev has relied over the years, with Kirilenko filling his shoes. This leadership would make for continuity in policy, but that policy would probably be conducted with less vigor and more caution. Collectivity would become more operative, and Kirilenko obviously could not immediately wield the authority and exercise the skills of his predecessor in fashioning political decisions. Furthermore, the interim nature of this arrangement could prompt a rise in political maneuvering by younger leaders and encourage inertia within the bureaucracy. Negotiations with the US, such as SALT,

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might encounter increasing difficulties in the absence of a preeminent leader highly concerned, at the end of all the hard bargaining, to get an actual agreement.

18. A more dramatic departure can never be entirely excluded. Adversities could pile up with a snowball effect. These might include deterioration of Brezhnev's health, economic problems, damaging events in the Middle East or elsewhere in the foreign arena, and an increase in political infighting among the leadership. In 1975, both five-year and fifteen-year plans must be approved and these matters, plus preparations for the Party Congress, provide plenty of opportunity for contention.

19. If events should take such a downhill slide, a power grab would become a greater possibility. In this case, turnover at the top might go beyond Brezhnev, and new policies would probably be advanced as a rationale for a coup. But at present, the size and self-interest of the senior core of Politburo members suggests that, even should Brezhnev have to depart, a power grab of this sort is several stages off in the future.

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